

Letters to The Editor

A Case Against Staying in Vietnam

Now that the American people are once again debating the issue of Vietnam, we desire to contribute to that discussion by presenting our own views, which reflect both personal judgments and years of professional research on the Vietnam war and related matters. We are expressing here our views as individuals, not speaking for the RAND Corporation, of which we are staff members; there is a considerable diversity of opinion on this subject, as on other issues, among our Rand colleagues.

We believe that the United States should decide now to end its participation in the Vietnam war, completing the total withdrawal of our forces within one year at the most. Such U.S. disengagement should not be conditioned upon agreement or performance by Hanoi or Saigon—i.e., it should not be subject to veto by either side.

It is our view that, apart from persuasive moral arguments that could lead to the same conclusion, there are four objections to continued U.S. efforts in the war:

1. Short of destroying the entire country and its people, we cannot eliminate the enemy forces in Vietnam by military means; in fact "military victory" is no longer the U.S. objective. What should now also be recognized is that the opposing leadership cannot be coerced by the present or by any other available U.S. strategy into making the kinds of concessions currently demanded.

2. Past U.S. promises to the Vietnamese people are not served by prolonging out inconclusive and highly destructive military activity in Vietnam. This activity must not be prolonged merely on demand of the Saigon government, whose capacity to survive on its own must finally be tested, regardless of the outcome.

3. The importance to the U.S. national interest of the future political complexion of South Vietnam has been greatly exaggerated, as has the negative international impact of a unilateral U.S. military withdrawal.

4. Above all, the human, political, and material costs of continuing our part in the war far outweigh any prospective benefits, and are greater than the foreseeable costs and risks of disengagement.

The opponent's morale, leadership, and performance all evidence his continuing resiliency, determination, and effectiveness, even under extremely adverse conditions (in no small part because of his conviction that he fights for a just and vital cause). Estimates that the opponent's will or capacity (in North or South Vietnam) is critically weakening because of internal strains and military pressures are, in our view, erroneous. Even if a new strategy should produce military successes in Vietnam, substantially reduce U.S. costs, and dampen domes-

tic opposition, Hanoi could not be induced to make any concessions (e.g., cease-fire or mutual withdrawals), so long as they implied recognition of the authority of the Saigon government. Thus, to make the end of U.S. involvement contingent upon such concessions is to perpetuate our presence indefinitely.

Our participation in the war will also be unjustifiably prolonged if we tie total withdrawals to basic changes in the policies and character of the South Vietnamese government. The primary interest of the present Saigon leadership is to perpetuate its status and power, and that interest is served not by seeking an end to hostilities through negotiations but only by continuing the war with U.S. support. Their interest is thus directly opposed to ours. For the same reason, the present Saigon government is not likely to seek the long-awaited improvements and "broadening" of its base. The United States should not obstruct favorable political change in Saigon by unconditional support of the present regime. Yet, we believe, the United States should in no way compromise or postpone the goal of total withdrawal by active American involvement in Vietnamese politics. Such interventions in the past have only increased our sense of responsibility for an outcome we cannot control.

Our withdrawal might itself produce the kinds of desirable political changes in Saigon that the U.S. presence seems to have inhibited, including the emergence of a cohesive nationalist consensus; and it might give better focus to our alliance relationships elsewhere in the world by bringing our Vietnam policy into line with the President's declaration in Guam on the limits of our partnerships.

As for global U.S. interests, the original rationale for a large scale U.S. military effort in Vietnam—the prevention of proxy victories by the USSR or Communist China—has long since been discredited. Moreover, we regard the Vietnamese insurgency as having special characteristics that cannot be considered typical of or exerting decisive influence on other revolutionary movements in Asia or elsewhere. We do not predict that only good consequences will follow for Southeast Asia or South Vietnam (or even the United States) from our withdrawal. What we do say is that the risks will not be less after another year or more of American involvement, and the human costs will surely be greater.

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